



John Raber House

5760 S. Lafayette Avenue

**Submitted to the Commission on Chicago Landmarks January 1988
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**CITY OF CHICAGO
Richard M. Daley, Mayor**

**Department of Planning and Development
J.F. Boyle, Jr., Commissioner**



ABOVE: The Raber House, shown in this 1987 photo, is one of the city's few remaining, pre-Fire residences. Note the changes in the facade from the engraving on the cover; these were made in 1894.

COVER: An 1874 engraving of the Raber House, depicting what it looked like from State Street. The residence's original grounds and gardens were so extensive that the house's initial address was on State Street, one block to the east.

RABER HOUSE

5760 S. Lafayette Ave.

(1870; major alterations, 1894; Thomas Wing, architect)

The RABER HOUSE is one of the city's few remaining, pre-Fire residences. It is one of the last surviving examples in the Englewood community of a large country estate. The wooden cupola, which caps the tall brick structure, has served for 125 years as one of the area's most prominent features. It is a focal point for those looking west, from Washington Park, along 58th Street.

The Italianate-style residence was constructed by John Raber, a prominent area businessman, real-estate developer, and politician. The residence's original grounds and gardens were so extensive that the house's initial address actually was on State Street (then South Plank Road), one block to the east.

Significant Features: The designation specifies the building "in its entirety, along with the property on which it stands."

Recommended to City Council: August 26, 1988

Ward: 20 (Alderman Troutman)

Ownership: It is owned by a private estate. There was no response to the request for consent.



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JOHN RABER HOUSE
5760 South Lafayette Avenue
Chicago, Illinois

Date of Construction: 1870
Architect: Unknown

Major Alterations: 1894
Architect: Thomas W. Wing

The architectural history of Chicago is one of building and rebuilding many times over, a physical demonstration of civic dedication to the notion of progress. It is not surprising that in the process of urbanization early farmsteads were lost and summer homes in formerly suburban areas were replaced. Rarely is a building identified which was constructed before the Great Fire of 1871, either in the central city or in the outlying neighborhoods, that remains intact on its original site. Equally rare and in many cases more enlightening is an early survivor that has been transformed as the community around it changed, both the building and its surroundings adapting to their unique position in the growing urban fabric to create a new collective identity. In the case of the former suburb of Englewood, the transformation from open countryside to fashionable suburb and later to urban neighborhood is demonstrated in microcosm through the history of the John Raber House.

During the 1850s three railroads, the Lake Shore & Michigan Southern, the Chicago, Rock Island & Pacific, and the Pittsburgh, Fort Wayne & Chicago, built major lines on the southern approach to Chicago that crossed one another in the vicinity of State and 63rd streets. The first settlement in this unincorporated area clustered around the crossing and took the name of Junction Grove after its most prominent natural and man-made features. The settlement included merchants and businessmen from the city, but most of the settlers were railroad workers who also maintained small truck farms. The name of the town was changed in 1867 to Englewood, after the town of that name in New Jersey which was known for its wooded beauty. The community stood on the east-central edge of the thirty-six square mile Township of Lake which, when it was finally incorporated in November of 1865, had a population estimated as less than 700.



Englewood did not begin to grow rapidly until the year 1869. In that year, the Cook County Normal School was founded on a ten-acre tract at 63rd Street and Stewart Avenue. The land was donated by L. W. Beck, a real estate developer who subsequently subdivided the surrounding 120 acres and added a public park that included lagoons and fountains fed by artesian wells. In the same year, the state legislature created the South Parks Commission which established the boulevards and South Park, now Washington Park, a few blocks to the east. By 1871 a horsecar line had been extended south on Wentworth Avenue as far as 63rd Street, adding another transportation link between Englewood and the Union Stock Yard area and the city beyond. The Union Stock Yard began operations in 1865, having consolidated on one site many smaller livestock yards in the city, providing many jobs for unskilled laborers. These activities spurred development and served to separate the community into an affluent eastern section and a working class western section.

Excellent transportation, developing recreational facilities, and a large expanse of available land attracted many new settlers in the wake of the Great Fire of 1871. By 1874 the estimated number of residents in Englewood exceeded 3,000, and by 1884 the population had risen dramatically to about 33,000. The Town of Lake, including Englewood, was annexed by the City of Chicago on June 29, 1889.

The Chicago, Rock Island & Pacific Railroad completed the survey of its right-of-way in April, 1851, and construction began the following spring. The first train made the run from Chicago to Joliet in October of 1852, and the line was opened a total of 181 miles to Rock Island in February, 1854. The construction of the railroads and the location of their crossing attracted real estate speculation from their inception.

The site of the John Raber House was undeveloped land adjacent to the Rock Island right-of-way, between what are now 57th Place and 59th Street, from State Street to Wentworth Avenue. Although records of deeds and titles were lost in the Fire, the surviving documents and supplementary sources provide fragmentary information on the early history of the site. The first known title to this land was held by Fredrich and Emma Rosenmerkel, owners of a pharmacy in the city. They purchased a large parcel that included the site, legally described as lot 6 in the School Trustees section of Lake Township. In the tract books of the office of the Cook County Recorder of Deeds, a map that was originally entered on December 17, 1855 records that Emma Rosenmerkel, as administratrix of her husband's estate, divided the south half of the lot into seven sublots. It also indicates two buildings on the north half of the lot on the Thompson Street, now Wentworth Avenue, side of the Rock Island right-of-way that are labeled "Dr. Walenta" (figure 1). Dr. Rudolph Walenta was a German-born physician who had a business relationship with Rosenmerkel through the latter's pharmacy. A trust deed dated November 22, 1865 records that Walenta sold all of lot 6 and that part of lot 5 south of 57th Place east of the tracks to John Raber for \$17,000. This parcel was equal to approximately 13 acres, ten in lot 6 and three in lot 5.

John Raber was born in Prussia on June 18, 1826 and emigrated to the United States with his parents in 1832. Settling first at Erie, Pennsylvania, the family moved to the town of Chicago in 1835. After serving his apprenticeship with a harnessmaker, Raber traveled Illinois and parts of Kentucky and Missouri as a journeyman between 1846 and 1849 when he returned to Chicago. In 1855 he built a saloon and residence on Archer Avenue at 22nd Street which he operated alone and for periods in partnership for over 25 years. Politically active, he was elected City Collector for the terms of 1860 and 1861, was elected alderman of the 5th ward for each of the years 1867 through 1869, and was nominated by the Republican Party for City Treasurer in 1881.

Raber had chosen to build his saloon between the towns of Chicago and Bridgeport, along the main road connecting the two and near the tracks of the Chicago, Rock Island & Pacific Railroad. In the 1895 book *Men Who Have Made the Fifth Ward*, Raber's biographer noted that "In the early days he worked zealously to populate the then sparsely settled region west of State Street, and much of his time was devoted to the building up of business on Archer Avenue, and the development of the outlying districts of the city." Part of this interest in development was expressed in his activities in Englewood, with the purchase he made from Walenta.

Everett Chamberlin, in his 1874 book *Chicago and its Suburbs*, used Raber's purchase as an example of rising real estate values in Englewood:

Mr. Raber purchased the house and ten acres of ground in 1862, for \$17,000, and shortly after purchased three acres adjoining to the south, for \$1,750. In 1869 he sold seven acres for \$17,000. He reserved the six acres he now owns. The premises are now considered worth fully \$75,000 at the present time.

Citing this passage in his book *Old Chicago Houses* of 1941, John Drury attributed the construction of the house to Walenta. However, these accounts differ from the legal records. According to the November 22, 1865 document, Raber took out a mortgage for \$17,000 to purchase the ten acres of lot 6 and the adjacent three acres in lot 5 to the north, rather than on the south. In saying that Raber "purchased the house and ten acres of ground," Chamberlin gave the impression that the house Raber occupied was the same house in which Walenta had lived. The map in the tract book indicates Walenta's house on Thompson Street, west of the tracks. Although Raber received this house as part of the purchase, it was not the same building in which he would eventually reside. Raber's house was east of the tracks, facing State Street and Washington Park at the foot of 58th Street, and must therefore have been a newly constructed building.

The mortgage was due at the end of 1871; an affidavit of March 30, 1869 records that Raber paid it off in full. The source of funds he used in this transaction may have been the sale of seven acres noted by Chamberlin, only part of which would have had to go toward the retirement of the debt. As an alderman of the 5th Ward elected in each of 1867, 1868, and 1869, Raber was required to reside in the ward during those years. The

city directories and the census confirm that he continued to live at the Archer Avenue address through the spring of 1870, but indicate that from May of 1871 he resided at Englewood. The evidence therefore suggests that Raber had his new house built during late 1869 and early 1870, and that he occupied it sometime between June, 1870 and April, 1871.

Fifty-eighth Street rises gently as it moves west from Washington Park to State Street. The site Raber chose for his house placed the gate, drive, and facade at the top of this rise and at the center of the vista from the park. The house was a 2½-story Italianate design on a tall basement, topped with a cupola and having a one-story wing on the north. The landscape design derived from the concept of the elegant country estate, a symmetrically arranged manifestation of a romantic ideal. Chamberlin described Raber's property at length and included an engraving of the house and grounds in his book (figure 2):

The engraving on page 400 represents the beautiful residence of Mr. John Raber. It is located on State Street, directly opposite Fifty-eight Street, fronting eastward towards the South Parks, and is the most attractive and home-like residence in the village. As will be seen, the house stands in the center of handsomely arranged grounds, consisting of six acres, and, although the building itself is not remarkable for its beauty, its surroundings are such as to render the general view very inviting. Within the enclosure are finely graveled walks and drives, bordered with beautiful arbor vitae hedges. Miniature lakes, filled with gold-fishes, and other pleasing features are to be met at every hand.

In spite of later subdivision and construction on the former grounds, the cupola is still visible at this end of 58th Street, and the view from State Street gives some idea of the setting in relation to that street (figures 3 and 4).

The first known map of Englewood is a bird's-eye view of the area between 55th and 71st streets, from Michigan Avenue to Halsted Street, published in 1872. Raber's house and grounds are clearly visible, bounded on all sides by fences and trees, with many of the features Chamberlin would describe two years later already in place. The map also illustrated that two houses had been built on the land to the south, facing the circular drive of Raber's estate, and that recent streets and houses had been built on the west side of the Rock Island right-of-way, on the former grounds of the Walenta house.

Raber retained title to three acres of undeveloped land when he sold the house and the three landscaped acres it occupied to John W. Rumsey for \$33,000 in July of 1876. Rumsey was a member of the Board of Trade and would establish his own commission merchant firm in 1877. A veteran of the Civil War, he became a director of Union Veteran Club of Englewood and was in part responsible for the erection of a Soldiers' Memorial Hall in the town that was dedicated on July 4th, 1881.

As the population of Englewood increased during the 1880s, the pressures of development affected properties near the Raber House. Small commercial buildings were built on State Street north of 57th Street, and subdivision began along the boulevards and the park to the east. Rumsey sold the property intact in July, 1888 to James Bolton, a self-described capitalist who lived at 4900 South Drexel Boulevard. Bolton subdivided the property and laid out extensions of Dearborn and Armour streets, now Lafayette and Perry avenues, through the grounds of the estate.

In September, 1890 the house and three 25 x 100 foot sublots were purchased by James and Esther Perry. On June 13, 1894 James Perry acquired a building permit for "Alterations" on the house, at that time given the address 5760 South Dearborn Street. *The Real Estate and Building Journal* for July 14, 1894 included the following item under "Advance Building News:"

Architect Thomas W. Wing has prepared plans for a flat building to be erected on Dearborn Street near 58th for James A. Perry. It will be 3 stories and basement high, 35 x 40 feet, have pressed brick and stone front, composition roof, bathrooms, electric bells, and will cost \$7,000.

Fire insurance maps allow for a comparison of the plan of the original house with the plan after it was redesigned by Wing, revealing that the 2½-story single family residence had been converted into a six-flat (figures 5 and 6). The reconstruction included increasing the thickness of the brick walls of the second floor from eight to twelve inches, the expansion of the attic to a full third story with eight-inch thick brick walls, the demolition of the one-story wing on the north side of the building, and radical interior alterations. With this reconstruction the Raber House took the form it presently retains (figure 7).

A reconstruction of the original elevation, made possible through the illustrated 1872 map of Englewood, the engraving in Chamberlin's 1874 book, and the plans provided by the fire insurance maps, allows for a comparison with the present elevation (figure 8). The original facade design is largely hidden by the change in location of the portal and the additions of the bays, the porch, and the third floor. Evidence of the original plan can be seen in the scars on the north side wall, where the roof line of the demolished one-story wing is still visible (figure 9). The roof line and cupola are the elements of the design to remain essentially intact, preserving the profile of the original house (figure 10).

After annexation to Chicago in 1889, the pace of growth in Englewood increased. The City improved water and sewage services and facilitated the installation of natural gas and electric service. The opening of the Jackson Park elevated railroad in 1892, the influence of the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893, the electrification of the surface lines in 1896, and the completion of the Englewood branch of the elevated in 1907 all contributed to the continuing influx of settlers. The exceptional transportation facilities put the shopping district at 63rd and Halsted streets within reach of most parts of the South Side, ensuring the development of this intersection into the second largest retail center in

the city after State Street in the Loop. The population grew from an estimate of 33,000 in 1884 to over 86,000 in 1920 and reached nearly 93,000 by 1940. Although the community reached residential maturity in the 1920s the number of residents continued to increase, to over 97,000 in 1950.

The features that made the site of the Raber House attractive to Walenta, Raber, Perry, and later settlers were different in detail, yet were essentially constant in concept: the railroads made the location accessible from the city, guaranteeing its value as a real estate investment. The residential directories never listed this location as Dr. Walenta's residence. He may have used it as a summer house, a rural escape from the congestion of the city. The estate built by Raber and maintained by Rumsey was a showplace of suburban affluence, an exemplar of the Victorian concept of the home as utopian retreat, isolated from the vulgar activities of commerce. Advancing railroad technology in the form of elevated rails and electrified streetcars increased accessibility to the area, in turn increasing the value of the land. Eventually, the pace of subdivision and settlement created a demand that could only be met through the subdivision of the extant buildings, completing a process which redefined the site and the neighborhood as parts of the urban fabric.

STAFF ANALYSIS OF LANDMARK CRITERIA APPLICABLE TO THE JOHN RABER HOUSE

Based upon its analysis of the information compiled, the staff of the Commission on Chicago Landmarks believes that the John Raber House merits designation as a Chicago Landmark and recommends that the Commission initiate the process leading to such designation. In the opinion of the staff, the structure fulfills three of the seven criteria set forth in Chapter 21.66 of the Municipal Code of Chicago.

CRITERION 1: *Its value as an example of the architectural, cultural, economic, historic, social, or other aspect of the heritage of the City of Chicago, State of Illinois, or the United States.*

The original ten-acre parcel on which the John Raber House was built was bisected by a railroad, and the history of the house and its community is linked to the expansion of rail service and advances in rail technology. From the initial settlement of the 1850s to the suburban era of the 1870s and the urban subdivisions of the 1890s, the railroads were of paramount importance to each phase of development in the community. The various uses to which the site was put, beginning with its probable use as a rural summer retreat by Dr. Rudolph Walenta, John Raber's construction of the elegant suburban house and garden, James Bolton's subdivision of the site, and James Perry's subsequent transformation of the building into a six-flat, is a demonstration of the economic, historic, and social heritage of Chicago neighborhoods generally and of Englewood in particular. Although the integrity of the original house has been compromised significantly, the alterations are exclusive to one renovation that demonstrates the transformation of the character of the community from suburban to urban.

CRITERION 3: *Its identification with a person or persons who significantly contributed to the architectural, cultural, economic, historic, social, or other aspect of the development of the City of Chicago.*

John Raber and his parents were among Chicago's earliest settlers, having arrived in 1835. He owned and operated a tavern, an institution that served as a political and social center in European immigrant communities. As a businessman and developer in his Near South Side German community, Raber was a prominent citizen; he was elected City Collector twice and alderman of the 5th ward three times.

CRITERION 7: *Its unique location or distinctive physical appearance or presence representing an established and familiar visual feature of a neighborhood, community, or the City of Chicago.*

The John Raber House is unique in its neighborhood, a survivor of an early era of suburban development in the community. Its distinctive hip roof and cupola

profile has been an established feature of this neighborhood for 118 years, where it retains its place in relation to the railroads, and as the focal point of the vista from Washington Park along 58th Street. The John Raber House remains essentially unchanged from its 1894 renovation designed by Thomas W. Wing. It has been in use as a six-flat and continues to be a viable part of its community.



RESIDENCE OF MR. JOHN RABER.

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Additional research material used in the preparation of this report is on file at the office of the Commission on Chicago Landmarks and is available to the public.

Acknowledgments

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Cover: from Chamberlin, *Chicago and Its Suburbs*, 1874

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The Commission on Chicago Landmarks, whose nine members are appointed by the Mayor, was established in 1968 by city ordinance. It is responsible for recommending to the City Council that individual buildings, sites, objects, or entire districts be designated as Chicago Landmarks, which protects them by law. The Commission is staffed by the Chicago Department of Planning and Development, whose offices are located at 320 N. Clark St., Room 516, Chicago, IL 60610; Ph: 312-744-3200; TDD Ph: 744-2958.